

## *The English present subjunctive*

### A PROBLEM IN OBSERVATION

AN EXAMINATION of the comments by linguists on the present subjunctive in current English reveals a surprising degree of unanimity of opinion concerning it. Most grammarians consider its extinction either imminent or accomplished. Thus, for example, Whitehall states that "the subjunctive is gradually dying out of the language."<sup>1</sup> Close considers that "apart from a few archaism remains it has disappeared from English altogether."<sup>2</sup> And Krusinga says flatly: "living English has no subjunctive at all."<sup>3</sup> Other writers say that it "has very little vital power left";<sup>4</sup> that it "has disappeared";<sup>5</sup> that it is "moribund";<sup>6</sup> that it is "extinct";<sup>7</sup> that it is "fossilized";<sup>8</sup> and so on. Several authors suggest that its death throes can be observed in "literary English."<sup>9</sup> It is the purpose of the first part of this article to examine the arguments supporting these conclusions and to comment on their validity. Two types of argument can be discerned: the historical and the morphological.

The historical argument is as follows. The subjunctive was used much more frequently in Old English than in Modern

<sup>1</sup>H. Whitehall, *Structural Essentials of English* (New York, 1956), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup>R. A. Close, *English as a Foreign Language* (London, 1962), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>E. Krusinga, *A Handbook of Present-Day English*, vol. 1, part 2 (Groningen, 1931), p. 147.

<sup>4</sup>O. Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (Oxford, 1958), p. 194.

<sup>5</sup>A. C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language* (New York, 1957), p. 400.

<sup>6</sup>G. H. Vallins, *The Pattern of English* (London, 1957), p. 26; H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford, 1960), p. 574.

<sup>7</sup>H. Poutsma, *A Grammar of Late Modern English*, part 2, section 2 (Groningen, 1926), p. 165; H. Sweet, *A New English Grammar*, part 2 (Oxford, 1958), p. 108.

<sup>8</sup>Poutsma, *loc. cit.*

<sup>9</sup>R. W. Zandvoort, *A Handbook of English Grammar* (London, 1957), p. 88; cf. also Krusinga, *op. cit.*, part 2, vol. 2, p. 451. In a recent article "On the So-called Subjunctive" (*ELT* 17 (1963), pp. 73-77), Zandvoort maintains that in at least one use the "s-less form" is "really alive" (p. 74).

English. For example, after the preposition *if* it was common to use a subjunctive in Old English, but such usage is uncommon today. To reach this conclusion, we are obliged to assume that a form which occurs less frequently than it did is disappearing from the language. This, however, is not necessarily true. The use of *do* as an auxiliary in the affirmative, for example, was far more frequent in the sixteenth century than it is today; but nobody suggests that *do* is disappearing as an auxiliary of the affirmative. The quantitative evidence is therefore not valid.

Another objection to this historical argument can also be raised: the fact that it is historical. Many are the denunciations laid at the door of grammarians who once tried to defend a form because of its usage in the past. Yet here there is an attempt to give the subjunctive its coup de grace with the same discredited historical axe. The historical argument is, therefore, hardly pertinent, because it is quantitative and because it is historical.

The second argument, based on morphology, is suggested by one contemporary linguist as follows: "in Present-day English, but one form remains in all verbs except the verb *to be*, to separate subjunctive mood from indicative."<sup>10</sup> Another modern grammarian makes the argument even more explicit: "By a subjunctive we understand a system of verbal forms existing by the side of another system (the indicative) and used to express a variety of modal relations. . . . Needless to say, English does not possess such a system, in contrast, for instance, to French and German."<sup>11</sup>

In other words, if the phonetic or graphic shape of a verb is the same as that of an indicative, then it cannot be distinguished from an indicative. A slight positivistic nudge brings one to the conclusion that because most subjunctives have come to look (or sound) like indicatives, they are indicatives. One writer sums up this position when he says: ". . . it is clearly a contradiction in terms to speak of 'subjunctives not distinguishable in form.'<sup>12</sup>

That appearances usually suggest that subjunctives are no longer different from indicatives is undeniable. But this is not sufficient reason to conclude that the two moods are the same.

<sup>10</sup>C. C. Fries, *American English Grammar* (New York, 1940), p. 103.

<sup>11</sup>E. Krusinga and P. A. Erades, *An English Grammar*, vol. 1, part 2 (Groningen, 1960), p. 643.

<sup>12</sup>F. Th. Visser, "The Terms 'Subjunctive and Indicative,'" *English Studies* 36 (1954), p. 206.

Such arguing would mean that the dominant *-er* conjugation in French has a present subjunctive only in the plural of the first and second persons. It would mean that the English noun *sheep* has no plural. It would mean that the infinitive of most English verbs no longer exists, since it is the same in appearance as the present of the indicative. The verb *put* would lose not only its infinitive, but also its past participle and its past tense.

At this point it is useful to examine precisely how an infinitive "not distinguishable in form" can nevertheless be distinguished from a present indicative. We may notice its lack of a subject, its use after the particle *to*, etc. That is, besides its phonetic or graphic shape, we must look at its position in the sentence. Not only morphological but also syntactical considerations are therefore valid criteria for distinguishing verbal categories.

Let us examine a few examples in Modern English in the light of these criteria to see whether the subjunctive really is extinct or whether it is failure to observe its occurrence which makes it seem so. Most observers agree on the existence of the subjunctive in sentences where it is morphologically different from the indicative. Thus, with the verb *to be*:

A bilingual country may require that its civil servants *be* fluent in the official languages of the country.<sup>13</sup> (1)

Since this is a review lesson, it is suggested that Practices which were difficult for the students in Lessons I-IX *be* re-emphasized.<sup>14</sup> (2)

Again, in the third person singular, the absence of the *s*-ending marks the subjunctive in content verbs:

All I ask is that she *look* after the kids.<sup>15</sup> (3)

Someone suggested that he *come* up and *see* us here.<sup>16</sup> (4)

In the above examples, the subjunctive can be identified morphologically. But it should also be observed that there is a curious sequence of tenses in examples (2) and (4)—a past tense (*was*, *suggested*) in the principal clause governs what is not a past in the subordinate clause. Sentences (1) and (3), on the other hand, do not show this unusual usage. Here, then, is our first syntactical criterion for recognizing a subjunctive: it is not subject to the normal sequence of tenses, as found in the indicative.

<sup>13</sup>W. F. Mackey, "The Description of Bilingualism," *CJL* 7, 2 (1962), p. 61.

<sup>14</sup>R. Lado and C. C. Fries, *English Pattern Practices* (Ann Arbor, 1958), p. 119n.

<sup>15</sup>Conversation.

<sup>16</sup>Conversation.

In our next examples, the subjunctive can again be recognized on purely morphological evidence (finite *be* and the absence of *-s*):

The only restriction to food is that it not *be* in particles.<sup>17</sup>

The Duke asked that the children not *be* punished.<sup>18</sup>

... on the one condition that it not *inconvenience* the University.<sup>19</sup>

... the general public seems to be more concerned that the school not *lose* sight of its function.<sup>20</sup>

The reader will already have remarked the peculiarity of syntax brought out by these examples: the subjunctive generally forms its negative without the auxiliary *do*, by taking the *not* before. This is our second syntactical criterion.

Let us examine a few examples where there is no morphological evidence, where the subjunctive is "not distinguishable in form."

The doctors suggest that I not *drink* coffee.<sup>21</sup>

I propose that we not *do* anything.<sup>22</sup>

It is essential that we not just *hold* our own.<sup>23</sup>

The syntax of the clause—the means of forming the negative—tells us that we have subjunctives here.

Again, we can distinguish the subjunctive by our other criterion of syntax, the sequence of tenses, in the following three examples:

He asked that I *suggest* a successor.<sup>24</sup>

Decency required that I *go* to see him.<sup>25</sup>

The Farm suggested I *blend* with red delicious apple juice and ferment the two together.<sup>26</sup>

So far we have identified subjunctives by either morphological or syntactical evidence. How about cases where there is neither?

We suggest that you *experiment* with your own proportions and flavour preferences.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Astronaut John Glenn in a television interview.

<sup>18</sup>CBC National News Bulletin.

<sup>19</sup>Conversation.

<sup>20</sup>Saturday Night (Aug. 8, 1961), p. 17.

<sup>21</sup>Conversation.

<sup>22</sup>Heard at the Canadian Linguistic Association business meeting, 1960.

<sup>23</sup>American presidential candidate Richard Nixon during a television debate, October 21, 1960.

<sup>24</sup>G. V. Carey, *American into English* (London, 1953), p. 17.

<sup>25</sup>O. Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar*, part 4 (London, 1954), p. 162.

<sup>26</sup>Personal letter.

<sup>27</sup>From an advertisement.

I am gratified by your suggestion that we *have* a personal meeting.<sup>28</sup>

I think it's only right that we publicly *recognize* . . .<sup>29</sup>

The first thing I would ask of my readers is that they *admit* the inadequacy of any rule if accepted usage does not agree with it.<sup>30</sup>

The true nature of such verbs can be determined by means of the substitution technique: we can put a third person singular noun or pronoun into the subject slot and observe the effect on the verb.

. . . that the buyer *experiment* with his . . .

. . . that he *have* . . .

. . . that this meeting publicly *recognize* . . .

. . . my reader is that he *admit* . . .

Since the verbs in these new clauses are subjunctives (it is clear that they can all be recognized morphologically), we are naturally led to the conclusion that those verbs in the original clauses are at the same time subjunctives, though not distinguishable in form.

What we wish to bring out in this brief examination is the fact that the subjunctive can be recognized even where it is phonetically or graphically identical to the indicative. It need hardly be pointed out, in the light of the above examples, that the subjunctive has not disappeared, nor is it moribund, extinct, or fossilized.

Let us examine the opinion that the subjunctive is gradually dying. Curme remarks on the tendency to "break through our rigid sequence [of tenses] and employ the simple present subjunctive even after a past tense has grown stronger."<sup>31</sup> Again it is only quite recently that grammarians have noted the curious formation of the negative without the auxiliary *do*.<sup>32</sup> Jespersen remarks<sup>33</sup> that although he has "scores of examples" of the type of subjunctive that we have been discussing, he found only one example attested before the Modern English Period—and it is a doubtful one. Finally, Charleston, commenting on British usage, says: "it would almost seem as if the subjunctive were gradually coming back into favour among modern writers, especially in

<sup>28</sup>Carey, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup>Heard at the business meeting of the Canadian Linguistic Association, 1961.

<sup>30</sup>Close, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>31</sup>G. O. Curme, *Syntax* (Boston, 1931), p. 403.

<sup>32</sup>See the discussion in *ES* 35 (1953), pp. 123f.

<sup>33</sup>Grammar, part 4, p. 162.

subordinate or dependent clauses, possibly under the influence of American-English usage. . . ."<sup>34</sup>

Yet this question cannot be treated scientifically because it involves a prediction of the future development of the English verb. At the beginning of this century, one well-known philologist predicted the death of the subjunctive within a generation.<sup>35</sup> The few examples that have been cited—and they are typical of a great many others<sup>36</sup>—indicate rather that the subjunctive is far from dead.

It remains to comment on the view that the subjunctive is an invalid, confined to the quiet atmosphere of literary English, but refused any active part in the hurly-burly of spoken English. The above examples should suffice to show that such is not the case, since many of them are taken from spoken English. And the following example, a ten-year-old's remark on opening a third Christmas present of soap, excludes any influence from literary English:

Do people suggest that I *take* a bath?

In light of the above remarks, it would seem more appropriate for observers of language to try to define the subjunctive's field of usage in Modern English—a work that has never been done—rather than to try to bury it alive. The interest of this problem is not limited to the present state of the English subjunctive, but extends to a more general field—that of the nature of observation in linguistics. The question raised is the following: how is it that so many linguists and grammarians have overlooked the occurrence of the subjunctive? What is lacking in their method of observation?

To answer this question, it is first necessary to make a distinction between two types of observation: "(a) spontaneous or passive observations, which are unexpected; and (b) induced or active observations which are deliberately sought, usually on account of an hypothesis."<sup>37</sup> The first type is termed "passive"

<sup>34</sup>B. M. Charleston, *Studies on the Emotional and Affective Means of Expression in Modern English* (Swiss Studies in English, 46; Bern, 1960), p. 289.

<sup>35</sup>H. Bradley, *The Making of English* (London, 1931; first printed, 1904), p. 53.

<sup>36</sup>See, for example, Zandvoort, *Handbook*, pp. 86f.; Curme, *Syntax*, pp. 400ff.; Jespersen, *Grammar*, part 4, pp. 161ff.; Krusinga, *Handbook*, vol. 2, part 2, p. 449.

<sup>37</sup>W. J. B. Beveridge, *The Art of Scientific Investigation* (London, 1961), p. 102.

because it is triggered by some change or difference in the data. Thus, we might see in a text . . . *I am . . . I am . . . I am . . . I be*; or, *we do not go . . . we do not see . . . we not write*. Apparent irregularities such as these seem to have little relation with one another. Such data has often been interpreted statistically. But this approach, according to Beveridge on the scientific method, is not always fruitful: "It is as well to forget statistics when doing this and consider the possibility of some significance behind slender associations in the observed data, even though they would be dismissed at a glance if regarded on a mathematical basis. More discoveries have arisen from intense observation of very limited material than from statistics applied to large groups."<sup>38</sup> What, then, should be done with these few disparate facts that seem to have very "slender associations"? What is done in sciences other than linguistics? ". . . The mind is particularly sensitive to changes or differences. This is of use in scientific observation, but what is more important and more difficult is to observe (in this instance mainly *a mental process*) resemblances or correlations between things that on the surface appeared quite unrelated. . . . It required the genius of Benjamin Franklin to see the relationship between frictional electricity and lightning."<sup>39</sup> These "resemblances or correlations" between apparently different things, and we might add, differences between apparently similar things, are mentally observable. Such relationships, which are hidden from ordinary physical observation, are the very stuff of scientific hypotheses and theories.

If, then, linguists are to follow the amazingly successful method of the physical sciences (that is, if they are to be truly "scientific"), they must, by means of "mental" observation, plunge beneath the surface of appearances to the realm of resemblances and differences. It is these relationships, observable only indirectly through analysis, which, formulated as a theory, account for the directly observable surface facts.

On referring our few facts to a coherent theory of mood,<sup>40</sup> it became obvious that the subjunctive could not be limited to the verb *to be* and the third person singular of other verbs, that there was a connection between the dropping of the *-s* and the

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 102; our emphasis.

<sup>40</sup>G. Guillaume, *Temps et Verbe, Théorie des aspects, des modes et des temps* (Paris, 1929).

indifference to tense sequence, and so on. It then became necessary to return to the directly observable facts to see if they corresponded to the mentally observed relationships; that is, to see if the theory was valid. In other words, the second type of observation then came into play: "induced or active observations which are deliberately sought, usually on account of an hypothesis." A few of the results of this procedure have already been presented in the form of comments on our examples.

It is a tribute to the validity of a theory if the second type of observation, the active type, discerns more than was seen under the first type. This is precisely what happened when we appealed to a theory of mood—we were able to discern the present subjunctive where it had hitherto been overlooked. This stands as further confirmation of the validity of the theory itself.